



## **In the Spotlight**

By Pamela Mills-Senn  
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Featuring timely accoutrements and numerous pet-related events, Pussy & Pooch provides Los Angeles and Long Beach residents with a “modern pet lifestyle experience.”

When husband-and-wife team Janene Zakrajsek and Rob Gaudio opened their first pet specialty store, Pussy & Pooch (yes, the name has raised some eyebrows), in the historic core of downtown Los Angeles in December 2007, they knew they wanted to create an out-of-the-ordinary experience for pets and pet owners.

“We see ourselves as something different,” explains Zakrajsek. “We call ourselves a modern pet lifestyle experience, with the emphasis on the experience. We want our clients to constantly discover something new and unique, and create an experience that draws in repeat business.”

Frustration over having to drive across town to obtain the raw food they preferred for their two cats and their Jack Russell terrier started the couple thinking about opening up their own store, says Gaudio. An added inducement was the fact that their downtown neighborhood lacked a nearby dog park, making it hard for their dog to find playmates. Even more compelling was the prospect of using their marketing know-how (both have strong backgrounds in marketing, brand building and event planning) to take retailing to a whole new level.

The L.A. location gave them the opportunity to turn philosophy into reality. Their business model has performed well enough (although growth has slightly slowed because of the recession) that last October they opened a second store in the Belmont Shore area of Long Beach, a locale known for being extremely dog-friendly, even obsessed.

### **Creating the Experience**

Both stores have an upscale, modern feel. Display units are modular, in bold, clean colors of green, black and white—a scheme carried throughout the stores. Electronic music lends energy and contributes to the slightly edgy, urban atmosphere. And while there’s plenty of merchandise (some of it fairly unconventional), it’s hardly overcrowded; Zakrajsek says she takes the “less is more approach” when it comes to stocking the shelves. This restraint, combined with the pet-friendly wide aisles that invite wandering and tail wagging, give the stores a sense of spaciousness and make it easy to call attention to products.

The L.A. store is 3,200 square feet; 400 of which is outside patio space (with wireless Internet), where people can hang out with their dogs, giving them a chance to socialize and play. There are five employees at that location, in addition to the owners. The Long Beach store is smaller (2,500 square feet), but has eight employees on staff.

The stores incorporate several unique features. For example, in addition to an animal-themed art gallery, the L.A. site offers grooming via the Bathhouse. Four different levels of service—self-service, express full service, full service, and full service and spa—are available in the loft-style space. Plans are to install the Bathhouse in the second location early this year.

A key feature shared by both locations is the Pawbar, best described as a sushi bar for dogs (and cats as well, if they dare, which apparently some do). “We were thinking of ways we could get people excited about their pets eating raw,” says Zakrajsek, explaining the motivation behind the concept.

The Pawbar looks very similar to a sushi bar, except for the three knee-high, rectangular holes carved into the sides, each with its own platform that holds a ceramic dish. The food is prepared in full view of the customers, who order from a menu that includes raw meat meals like turkey or chicken nuggets, or burgers drizzled with gourmet sauces; stews, served hot or cold; soup, served hot or cold; organic, freshly prepared

meals; and treats like organic frozen yogurt, assorted bakery items, and two kinds of nonalcoholic dog “beer” (actually malted chicken- or beef-flavored water).

The inventory is chosen with just as much care. “I select the merchandise with a purpose,” says Zakrajsek. “The products and accessories must be functional; either they help to solve a problem or they contribute to overall health and happiness.”

The focus is on natural, organic foods (displayed in the “grocery” section) that contain no additives like corn, soy or wheat byproducts. Top brands include Nature’s Variety, The Honest Kitchen, Origin and Merrick. The store offers supplements and holistic treatments/remedies from The Honest Kitchen, Flying Basset, Bach Flower Remedies and a full line of vitamins from Pet Naturals. It also carries leashes, collars, bedding, dental products, bowls, toys and various accessories, favoring eco-friendly, biodegradable products and buying locally whenever possible.

“I don’t want to be everything to everybody,” says Zakrajsek of her merchandise choices. “I want to guide customers down a path with products that I have hand-selected for them.”

### **Focus on Events**

The Pawbar not only helps introduce people and their pets to the benefits of a raw diet, it provides yet another opportunity for socializing between canines and humans—a key objective for these owners. This is why the couple has developed a full calendar of events that include monthly free “Mutt Mingles,” pet adoptions, obedience classes, and other special activities.

“I feel like we have an event every five minutes,” laughs Gaudio. “Some customers say we have more going on than a nightclub.”

Each Mutt Mingle is themed. They had a “green” mingle in honor of Earth Day, where they gave away solar shades provided by a vendor partner (they bring in product reps, as well as non-pet partners whenever possible) and served organic cocktails. Refreshments for people and treats for pets are provided, as are beverages. Their costs vary, depending on the occasion and vendor partner involvement.

Last holiday season, they held their third annual “12 Days of Twinkle” at both stores. From Dec. 12 - 24, there were daily promotions on a variety of products and services. For example, a treat tasting at the Pawbar, with 15 percent off on treats; 15 percent off all fashion and accessories; and a “dog wash and spa day” that offered customers a 15 percent discount on spa/grooming products.

They’ve also done “Furlicious” events outside in the community. These typically involve sponsors or partners, with budgets that can run up to \$5,000, depending on the venue, food and production values. Tickets are sold and the after-cost proceeds are donated to a pet-centric charity. Pussy & Pooch provides staffing, product and funds additional miscellaneous costs. “Hundreds attend,” says Gaudio. “Each time, the crowd gets bigger. And they attend with dogs; we’ll get anywhere from 100 to 200 dogs.”

Other events have included a Valentine’s speed-dating-with-your-dog night and a viewing party for the season finale of CBS’ “Greatest American Dog” (attended by more than 200 guests, 50 dogs and the reality show’s winning team).

Although Gaudio says their sales do jump up during in-store events, especially during the mingles, their larger purpose is to thank customers for their business and draw new ones to their store, assisted by the awareness-building Furlicious events, their social networking site (called “The Hydrant”) and other outside activities. “In terms of revenue, we consider these more of an investment in the future,” he explains.

However, there’s one thing these busy owners would like to see happen pretty quickly. “We’re dying for a vacation,” admits Zakrajsek.